

ELSAH HISTORY

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ELSAH CELEBRATES AUTUMN



Bluff Shapes, photo by Jeffrey Vaughn

The 2012 Village of Elsie Museum greatriverroad.com purchase prize winner.

Elsah News

Contra Dancers Are Stepping Again at Farley's

Regularly scheduled community contra dances have returned to Farley's Music Hall, thanks to Elsahtes Susan and Mark Young. Dancers of all ages and experiences are welcome to these events, made possible by Historic Elsa Foundation.

In contra dancing, sometimes described as New England folk dancing, partners dance in two facing lines. Like square dancing, there is a caller or leader who leads everyone through each dance just before the music begins. Participants learn each dance by walking through the steps and formations. According to Susan, "If you can walk in a circle, you can contra dance."

According to *Wikipedia*, modern contra dancing traces its roots to 17th century English country dances. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the dance form evolved further in France before being "imported" to the colonies. This style of dancing became very fashionable in the U.S. in the early to mid-19th century, but before the Civil War, square-dancing began to replace contra dancing in popularity. For nearly a century, contra dances virtually disappeared in all but small towns scattered throughout the Northeast.

Since the 1960's, contra dancing has been revitalized. Today's dances are more flowing and energetic and include more "swing time" and less standing in one place.

The dances at Farley's occur on **the second Saturday of each month**. Susan and Mark recruit different bands and callers each month, mainly from the St. Louis area where contra dancing has become very well organized. The musicians and callers have said they especially enjoy performing in an authentic 19th century hall, with a beauty and feel that is made for their kind of performances. Susan reports, "Farley's really comes alive during a contra dance."

Dance times are from 7:00 to 10:00 pm. Admission is \$6.00 at the door for adults. Kids are free and encouraged. Simple refreshments, water, cookies, fruit, pretzels, etc. are provided.

Historic Elsa Foundation's annual **Christmas House Tour** will take place on **Saturday, December 1, 2012**, 2:00 to 5:45 pm, with seven homes open. Free carriage rides, caroling, a visit to Santa, and a catered meal will be available. That evening the Principia College Choir and Orchestra will perform Handel's *Messiah* in Cox Auditorium on the college campus. Advance tickets for the house tour are \$15, available after November 1st at the

Alton Visitor's Center, at Elsa B&Bs, or on line at www.historicelsa.org, clicking on [community events](#).

Hosmer-Williams Lecture at Farley's Music Hall in Elsa, Illinois

John Dunphy, local historian, *The Abolitionist Movement in Southwestern Illinois: Before and During the Civil War*, Thursday, November 8, 2012 at 7:30 P.M.

(Sponsored by Liberty Bank of Godfrey, IL.)

Photography Exhibit

The **Village of Elsa Museum** holds an annual **Photography Exhibit**. The purpose of the exhibit is to celebrate and foster an appreciation of the beauty and unique qualities of Elsa and the immediate area in every season.

The exhibit has two first place purchase prizes of \$150 each for a matted print. The Village of Elsa purchase prize recognizes the Elsa valley. The Greatriverroad.com purchase prize recognizes the immediate area around Elsa.



This year, "Mossy Barn" by Bonnie Lee Noeninger was the winner of the Village of Elsa purchase prize. It shows the Cresswell barn beautifully framed with the trees.

Bluff Shapes (Newsletter cover photo) by Jeffrey Vaughn was the Greatriverroad.com purchase prize winner. The image was the result of many years of watching and studying the bluffs. Vaughn's works on paper and paintings are well-known. He currently has a solo exhibition in New York City. See his website: <http://www.jeffreyvaughn.com>.

Maybeck's Visits to Elsah

In December of 1930, Bernard R. Maybeck, a renowned architect from San Francisco, set foot for the first time in Elsah, Illinois. He arrived to inspect 2000 acres of farm land fronting the Mississippi River on the bluffs above the Village. The land had been purchased just weeks before his arrival as a place for a new campus for Principia College.

Seven years earlier, Principia had retained Maybeck for the purposes of designing buildings and landscaping for the then proposed new four-year college to be developed on a 250 acre site in St. Louis County. Maybeck drew plans for several buildings and sketched a landscaping plan for college grounds.

In October 1930, Principia's administration concluded the St. Louis County property, which is near the present day intersection of Interstate 170 and Page Avenue, would not be suitable for an institute of higher education. Because the four-year program had started that fall, the school was in urgent need of new facilities. Principia trustees quickly sought acreage elsewhere. Within weeks, they purchased several parcels of farmland near Elsah, and asked Maybeck to begin adjusting his building designs as needed for this new setting.

From 1931 through 1935 Maybeck made five more trips to Elsah in order to complete building plans and to monitor construction practices and progress. The following timeline provides some of the details of Maybeck's visits.



The Maybeck team at Piasa Lodge in Elsah, from left, Butler Sturtevant, John Adams, Ed Hussey, Charles Lundgren, and William Higgenbotham. Photo courtesy of Principia Archives, used with permission.

December 1930: Bernard Maybeck and his wife Annie visit the Elsah property for the first time.

April 12, 1931: Maybeck and his wife Annie leave their Berkeley home for a two-month stay in Elsah to begin construction on the new campus. They stay at Eliestoun; attend the ground-breaking ceremony at the Chapel building site on May 4; and with his on site representatives, Edward Hussey and John Lundgren, establish a satellite office in Elsah for his firm.

In May and June in Elsah, Maybeck helps local grocers, Edwin and Albert Spatz, build a new gas station. Maybeck uses local stone, concrete and wooden beams salvaged from Elsah's Piasa Bluffs Hotel that is being demolished. Maybeck instructs the masons working at the college to examine the stone work for the gas station as an example of the appearance he seeks to achieve on the exteriors of some of the buildings on campus.

October 1932: Maybeck returns to Elsah to review construction progress and to plan more accurately for the locations of buildings and roads not yet started. Just prior to his return, construction is halted due to depleted funds and labor disputes. The work stoppage lasts for nearly one year.

October 1933: Construction resumes, and Maybeck returns to Elsah. He stays for three months to oversee construction, especially the completion of the Chapel interior.

June 8, 1934: Principia College holds first graduation in the Chapel.

September 1934: Maybeck returns to Elsah for three months to supervise construction of the science building, a temporary dining room and kitchen and two temporary wood shingle style classrooms.

March 4, 1935: Principia College holds its first classes at the Elsah campus, having moved from St. Louis during the previous week.

Fall 1935: At Frederic Morgan's request, Maybeck makes his final visit to the Elsah campus to see the finished results. He starts a general layout of the "College Center", which includes a Library and Great Hall. He is 73 years old.

1938: Maybeck retires from active work.

Maybeck Consults Percival Robertson (Dr. Robbie) on Coloration for Campus Building Exteriors

Robert Craig tells us, "Dr. Robbie and staining: I remembered correctly. It was in my interview with him in 1973. Jackpot!"

In February 1973, as part of my dissertation research for my doctoral work at Cornell University, I taped an interview with Dr. Percival Robertson, former science teacher at the college. The subject was primarily Bernard Maybeck's design for Principia College's Watson Laboratories, the school's science building. Dr. Robbie discussed the character of Maybeck's building and its siting, and the interview also included some remarks disclosing Dr. Robbie's interest in geology and local stonework in the village of Elsah. Dr. Robertson described Maybeck's observations of various "signs of age" on Elsah stonework—stains, discolorations, and moss or rust



Piassa Lodge, Mill Street, Elsah, Illinois, photo from Historic Elsah Foundation Archives, used with permission.

marks visible on the walls of village houses and gardens. Maybeck had declared to his college client his intention that the college dormitories and other campus buildings he planned should not appear new, but instead give the impression of growing out of the ageless bluff-top landscape: the architecture should present a timeless quality of having always been there. Dr. Robbie's knowledge of chemistry was called to bear to introduce certain impressions of age, much like a painter might select burnt umber to "stain" a wall surface represented in a painting. Dr. Robbie contributed to the architect's "picture" of Tudor architecture by brushing onto stone surfaces selected chemicals which would discolor a stone

mortar joint or stain a stone wall. Such experimental highlights were tested on the architect's "sample house," soon to be nicknamed The Mistake House. Splotches even tinged the gunite north slope of The Mistake House roof. Maybeck's "painterly approach" to architecture, which I recently described in my book, *Bernard Maybeck at Principia College: The Art and Craft of Building*, informed the coloristic tile work on the roof of dormitories, as well as the architect's *chiaroscuro* efforts in highlighting with painted brushstrokes the urn perched high atop the



Stone sidewall and window treatment, Pinney-Hussey house, Historic Elsah Foundation archives.

college chapel. As Dr. Robbie's interview shows, it was the village of Elsah and its historic blemishes that inspired a technique of "antiquing" which the architect employed in his effort in the 1930s to create a timeless architecture at the college

Here's an excerpt from the transcript of my interview with Dr. Robbie: [Dr. Robbie speaking, brackets are my explanatory inserts] "Mr. Maybeck was very desirous of having the brand new buildings that he was putting on the campus look as though they had always been there. He wanted to get the feeling of the antiquity of an English village right away.... But when Maybeck went around the town---the village here [Elsah], looking at these buildings, he recognized that the reason for the age that they

expressed was due to staining. That various metal things around a house---the eaves, the gutters, the downspouts, and that sort of thing---would rust and would stain the stone or brick or whatever it was. And that was part of the antique feeling of the village. And he wanted to know if it was possible to make the buildings look antique very promptly. Well, I guess it must have been Mr. Frederic that said, "Well, Robbie over there is head of the chemistry department--and I was for a long time--and perhaps he could tell you." So, on another time, I



talked with Maybeck and he was asking me questions: how to produce those stains that he saw. Well, the majority of the stains are from rusted iron, but occasionally you get stains from some copper guttering or copper flashing, that gives a different color, and then, too, there are tiny plants that belong in the same class as mosses, but I don't know whether they're mosses or not, there a lower type but they're like those, that grow--they don't grow high, they grow very close---that darken the breaker stone or whatever it is at various places. He talked to me about such things and wanted to know if we could imitate those things. Well, I did a little bit of thinking---I knew what the material was that produces the rust. If you want to see a good example of it, and it's done very recently, and I didn't do it intentionally, as you go out [of "Bible House" where interview was conducted], notice that I got a wrought iron hand rail along the steps and you'll see it's already rusted and the bottom of the hand rail is in brown stains in the stone and concrete flagging. And I got the chemical that would produce that color, and also another that would imitate--- in fact actually had copper in it---that would produce the same effect as copper flashing. And then I thought up another thing that would produce a very, very dark green, not quite

black, and went out [with] some brushes. I went over one afternoon by appointment to the Mistake House--well you've seen how he put in every different type of



Mistake House photo by Tim Tomlinson, used with permission

construction he was going to have here, but you probably never noticed--and it'll have to be called to your attention that there are ancient stains on that at appropriate places that were put on that afternoon, in places in corners of the building, and that sort of thing. And Maybeck seemed to be quite interested, and I was glad to find some way that a science teacher could improve Tudor architecture. I don't



Rackham House doorway, photo by Jane Pfeifer, used with permission.

know why---perhaps he didn't like it---he appeared to--- and I don't think he ever did it [on the main buildings]. [conversation then moves on to color roof tiles].

Editor's Note: Dr. Percival Robertson was professor of geology and chemistry at Principia from 1915 to 1956. After the college moved to Elsay in 1935, he lived in what is now called the Robertson House, in the woods along the back way from the Village to the college. He purchased and remodeled the Bible House on LaSalle Street after retirement and lived there until his passing in 1979.

First Impressions

(From a received stamp with the following information)

Architects Office

Oct-9, 1931

Elsah, Illinois

October 7, 1931

Dear Mr. Hussey and Mr. Lundgren;

We've got to soften the stone work some how. Suppose we try a section of wall, (as though it had been laid at another time,) without raking the joints at all,--just daub in the mortar and leave it.. .

In this letter Maybeck explains how campus buildings should look. Principia Archives, used with permission.

In the meantime the Elsah service station appeared and the feeling grew that the dormitories should seem to belong, more or less, to the Elsah atmosphere, homespun, homemade, with refinements at Windows etc. where an expert and artist from the big city had been called in to help.

Everybody who sees Elsah seems to love it,--the people we want to reach are the ones who see and feel that way—we must move heaven and earth to get it. Principia is spending all this money for us to paint a picture.

Sincerely yours,

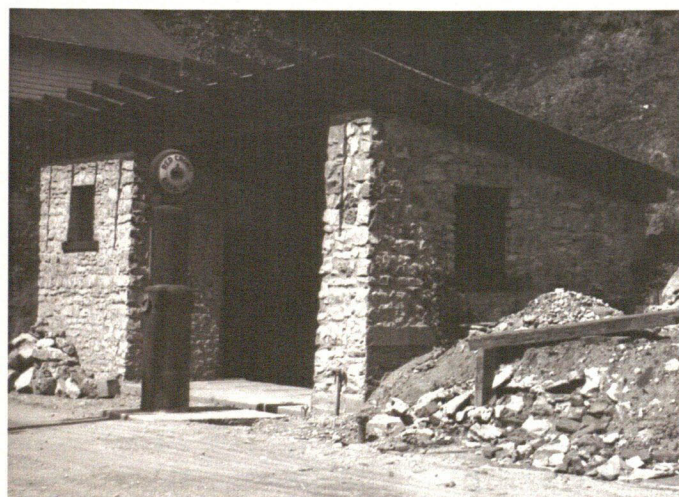
B. R. Maybeck

Photo information:

top right, Conference in field, B. R. Maybeck, C. H. Shepherd, T. E. Blackwell, April 30, 1931;

center right, Spatz Filling Station;

lower right; Bernard and Annie Maybeck, walking in Elsah woods, April 26, 1931.



Elsah Buildings with Maybeck Connections, by Jane Pfeifer

Bernard Maybeck was greatly influenced by the feel and appearance of buildings in the Village of Elsay. However, Maybeck and his firm also influenced properties in Elsay. The Ward Rockabrand House, the Pinney Hussey House, the Reed-Cresswell House, and the Spatz Filling Station have a strong connection with the "new" college in town. This article will focus on two buildings, the Pinney Hussey House and the Spatz Filling Station.

The Pinney Hussey House, located at 7 Valley, was also known as Illini Lodge.



Edward Hussey and his wife Nora purchased the house in 1935 from Maude and Robin Relph, according to an interview with Edward Hussey by Charles Hosmer on August 2, 1967. The Husseys owned the house until 1947 when they sold it to Principia. After Edward Hussey left Elsay, it served as a rental for Principia College faculty and staff.

Edward B. Hussey was one of the on-site architects for the Maybeck and White Elsay Office. He designed and contracted for renovations that gave the Pinney Hussey building a Gothic or English Tudor appearance. Some of the materials came from the College building project, discarded materials and broken pieces. Hussey worked on the Principia College commission from 1931 until 1935 (with the exception of the construction shut down for one year, late 1932 through 1933) after which he worked directly for Principia to complete the college buildings, design and construct a number of faculty homes and the Writer's Cabin. Hussey and Principia both believed that he would return to work on the remaining planned buildings. Unfortunately, this did not happen due to the changes brought about by World War II.

In 1991, the Dearborn family owned the house. They renovated the inside and, to show the original late 19th century frame house siding, removed the Tudor like siding (with Zoning Board approval). However, some of the Hussey designed Gothic/Tudor exterior features still remain and show the creative thought of Hussey and his work with Maybeck. The garage as well as a bay window, side porch, bathroom addition, front porch, a chimney and "heatilator" fireplace remain. The



garage is especially unique. The garage doors are designed to open up and out so that the snow will not keep them from opening. The garage roof is gunite (a particular brand of sprayed concrete) over automobile frames. Even though there have been problems with the roof leaking, it is a 75 plus year old roof today!

The most direct Elsay connection to Bernard Maybeck is the building to which he contributed a sign and also helped in the construction, the Spatz filling station. The Spatz family owned what is now called the Mott Building. They had an ice cream parlor at which Maybeck enjoyed purchasing ice cream and talking with the local residents.

Maybeck was concerned when he heard the Spatz brothers wanted to construct a filling station for their office, a metal building with a gas pump outside. Maybeck designed and helped build the structure. However, it fell into disuse as such stations gave way to modern stations.

In 1978, the building was saved and renovated by Inge and Al Mack and their son, Eric Mack, to use as a gallery. They put in a new front wall with a large glass window to enclose the space. The Macks were able to save the original Maybeck front door and two side windows. All internal alterations can be removed to return the structure to the original Maybeck design. The Spatz Filing Station is currently used as a Christian Science Reading Room and leased from The Principia

There was an obvious day-to-day connection between Maybeck, Principia, and Elsah—villagers had to be excited and happy to have the economic benefit of construction during those hard days of the Great Depression. And, today we have the architectural signatures of those architects and craftsman in these two buildings. Rather like people in the eastern part

of the United States who say, “Washington slept here,” in Elsah, we say “Maybeck was here!”

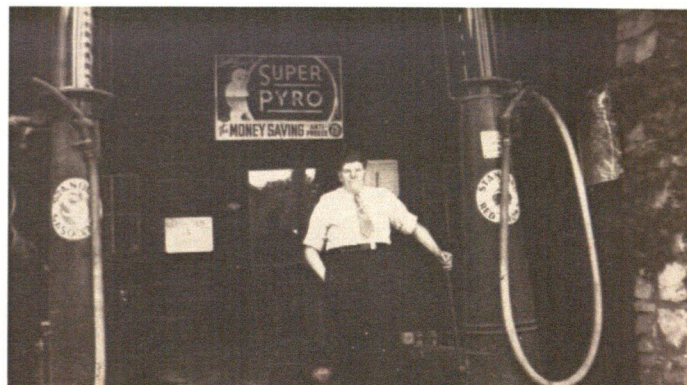


Photo above, Spatz in front of two “later” Standard Red Crown pumps, photograph from Village of Elsah Museum, donated by Mrs. John Heintz on behalf of Ailsia Matthews Metz, 1991 Photos, page 7, Historic Elsah Foundation archives, col. 1, Pinney Hussey House; col. 2, Pinney Hussey House, north side Hussey addition, David Kreutz photograph, 1991. Unless otherwise noted, photos on pages 5-6 are from the *Principia Archives*, Principia College, Elsah, Illinois, used with permission.

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The purposes of Historic Elsah Foundation as stated in the Articles of Incorporation (1971) are:
...the preservation and enhancement of the historic buildings, houses, architecture and culture of the Village of Elsah, Illinois, the historic areas, the publication of historical brochures, pamphlets, and periodicals regarding the Village, and the establishment of an educational program to inform the general public of the historical and the educational values of the Village.